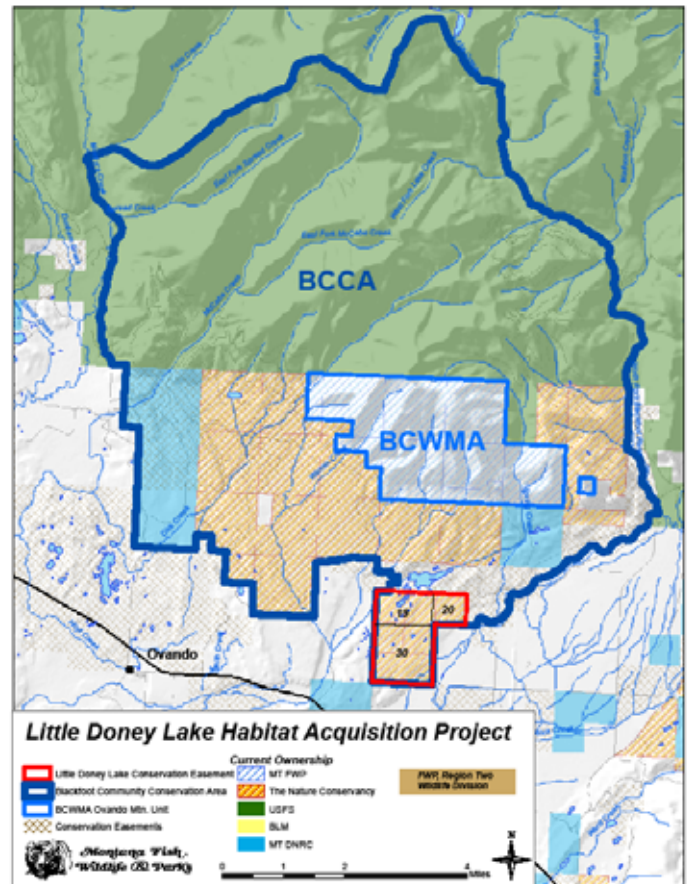


Appendix B: Little Doney Lake Conservation Easement

DRAFT MANAGEMENT PLAN

INTRODUCTION

FWP would acquire a conservation easement on the Little Doney Lake property from The Nature Conservancy. FWP's purpose for acquiring the conservation easement, as stated in the easement document, would be to "preserve and protect in perpetuity the conservation values of the land, particularly the habitat the land provides for a variety of wildlife species." The property was owned by Plum Creek Timber Company from the early 1990s through 2006 and was managed for commercial timber production. Livestock grazing has been part of the historic land-use practices, although not for the past several years. The property is highly valued as a public hunting area, and has been an important part of the Ovando Mountain Block Management Area (administered by FWP on behalf of several cooperating landowners) since 1990. It is the intent of the conservation easement that these traditional uses be specifically provided for in perpetuity.



This management plan serves as a flexible link between easement terms intended to endure in perpetuity and changeable conditions and situations on the land. It is a living document, to be reviewed annually by FWP and the landowner, and to be revised as needed upon agreement of both parties. Its function is to document strategies for land management in which FWP and the landowner are cooperating to ensure consistency with the terms and intent of the proposed conservation easement. The principal strategy is a protocol for an annual meeting with the landowner and field monitoring of compliance with easement terms. Additionally, this management plan addresses strategies for controlling noxious weeds, managing forested habitats, managing livestock, and allowing the public hunting access guaranteed in this easement. Finally, this management plan captures the commitment of the landowner and FWP to participate as long-term partners in the Blackfoot Community Conservation Area (BCCA), of which the Little Doney Lake property and several neighboring public and private landholdings are a part.

AREA DESCRIPTION

The Little Doney Lake property is located in north Powell County, about 4.5 miles ENE of Ovando, at the base of Ovando Mountain. Elevations range from 3,900 to 4,200 feet across approximately 1,103 acres. The landform generally is a bench intersected by northeast-southwest running draws. The principal wetland feature is Little Doney Lake, among other dry or seasonally wet potholes. The property is principally forested with ponderosa pine and Douglas-fir in the uplands, and spruce in the lowlands. The forest has been commercially harvested over multiple entries, leaving mature timber, snags, and regeneration in a clumped and erratic distribution across the property. Aspen is present throughout. The understory is a mix of rough fescue, elk sedge, serviceberry, snowberry, and willow. Spotted knapweed is the main noxious weed problem at present.

The Little Doney Lake property is part of the fall-winter-spring range for about 500 elk and about 200 white-tailed deer and 200 mule deer. In addition to ruffed and blue grouse, black bear, mountain lion, coyote, moose and wolf, these parcels are also important occupied habitat for grizzly bear and waterfowl, owing in part to the wetlands and associated broad riparian areas near the North Fork of the Blackfoot. One of very few common loon nest sites in the Blackfoot watershed exists on Little Doney Lake.

BASELINE INVENTORY

The existing features and conditions on the Little Doney Lake Conservation Easement would be described, photographed and documented in a baseline inventory. The purpose of the baseline inventory would be to establish an objective and reliable basis from which to assess changes on the land over time. FWP would contract with a qualified consultant to prepare this document. FWP and the landowner would cooperate in providing all pertinent information to the consultant, and in signing the final baseline inventory when both parties agree it is an accurate and complete representation of all pertinent conditions on the land. This inventory would be finalized within 6 months after closing.

ANNUAL MONITORING

FWP and the landowner would build a written record of annual easement monitoring, beginning in 2009. FWP recently hired a land steward to conduct one monitoring visit per year for all of its conservation easements across Montana. Each visit is arranged with prior notice for a time that is convenient for the landowner. The contractor uses a checklist to ensure that all pertinent easement terms are discussed with the landowner, and provides an opportunity for the landowner to present any issues or concerns for the record. An inspection of the property is always part of the monitoring visit. The contractor makes a special effort to photograph sites of current interest and to replicate photos from photopoints established in the baseline inventory. The contractor's annual monitoring report objectively documents any areas of misunderstanding or noncompliance with easement terms. It is left to FWP and the landowner to address any problems identified by the monitoring consultant. In the case of the proposed Little Doney Lake Conservation Easement, FWP's regional liaison (the wildlife biologist based in Seeley Lake) will normally accompany the contractor and meet with the landowner during annual monitoring, which typically will be scheduled for ½-day in midsummer. FWP's regional liaison will also be

available to the landowner upon request between monitoring visits to discuss management issues and share information.

NOXIOUS-WEED MANAGEMENT

The spread of existing noxious weed species and the introduction and establishment of new exotic species are among the greatest risks to native plant communities and wildlife habitat across Montana. Currently, noxious weeds (primarily spotted knapweed) are scattered near roads on the easement area. With a concerted effort, the densities and distributions of existing weed occurrences can be kept under control, at or below baseline levels. Expertise and experience within and adjunct to the Blackfoot Community Conservation Area—an organization of neighboring private landowners and agency land managers—will be of great assistance in this regard to the owner of the Little Doney Lake property.

Under the terms of the conservation easement, noxious weed control would be the landowner's responsibility. FWP would encourage the landowner to inventory the easement area annually for new weed occurrences by inspecting roadways, cowpaths, game trails and other disturbed sites where weeds are likely to enter the property first. Any new species occurrences should be reported to the local county weed district and FWP, and the landowner should promptly attempt to eradicate these spot occurrences by the most efficient and effective means available.

Key factors that could minimize the long-term vulnerability of the land to weed establishment, such as intensity and frequency of livestock grazing, would be controlled by the terms of the conservation easement. The landowner would be encouraged—beyond restrictions specified in the easement—to continue managing the land in a manner that avoids impacts from noxious weeds and favors vigorous and competitive communities of desirable plant species. FWP would inform the landowner that broadcast herbicide treatments to control noxious weeds should not include aspen or wetland/riparian vegetation, unless a herbicide specifically labeled for such use is available.

FOREST MANAGEMENT

The Little Doney Lake Conservation Easement allows the landowner to manage forest stands and, if desired, realize an income from sustainable timber harvest. Such forest management activities are required to fall within limits and meet objectives set forth in the easement document and this management plan, which will ensure that forests on the easement area will continue to function as effective wildlife habitat. The easement requires the landowner to submit a detailed notification or plan for FWP's review and approval before timber harvest activities may occur. Upon receiving notification from the landowner, FWP would collaborate with the landowner to make sure that all forest management terms in the easement are addressed before logging begins. This may include field inspections to review and input on harvest unit boundaries and harvest prescriptions. In most cases, FWP would require the landowner to mark trees to cut or leave in advance of the harvest to facilitate such field inspections and monitoring.

FWP would advise the landowner to recruit forested cover (in the form of large-diameter trees and regeneration thickets) and forested forage (e.g., tree lichen and understory grasses, sedges and shrubs) for elk and mule deer year-round. Mature coniferous canopy on the easement area will provide nest trees for red-tailed hawk, great horned owl, great gray owl and other birds.

Large-diameter snags and standing burned trees provide nesting and foraging habitat for a suite of cavity nesting birds (e.g., pileated woodpecker, black-backed woodpecker) and mammals (e.g., flying squirrel). Large downfall contributes to marten, lynx and small mammal populations, provides forage for black and grizzly bear, and dens for mountain lion. A generally mature forest structure also provides escape cover for elk in hunting season and contributes to holding elk in the hunting area to provide season-long hunting recreation and achieve the desired harvest. Silvicultural practices should tend toward: (1) maintaining and increasing larger-diameter trees (both living and dead) across the forested easement area; (2) maintaining and recruiting a mature forest structure across the majority of acres; (3) allowing habitat diversity within a generally mature forest structure, as may be provided by an interspersed of large trees, regeneration thickets, downfall, natural parks and temporary managed openings; (4) encouraging progression through a natural range of forest successional stages at the stand level, rather than attempting to manage for a static forest; (5) allowing the natural fire regime, as may be mimicked by silviculture, to benefit wildlife populations while managing the risk of large, stand replacement events; and (6) encouraging the control of noxious weeds along logging roads, landings and skid trails.

Aspen generally occurs in distinct stands of a few acres in size, scattered across the Little Doney Lake property. Aspen measurably adds wildlife species richness (particularly among cavity nesting birds and after a fire event) wherever it occurs on the landscape. Silvicultural practices should tend to maintain and enhance aspen as a significant habitat component across the Little Doney Lake Conservation Easement by: (1) restricting the cutting of aspen except as may be approved by FWP to stimulate resprouting; (2) encouraging the removal of coniferous competition within and surrounding aspen clones; and (3) discouraging the broadcast usage of herbicides around aspen stands that might kill or suppress aspen (e.g., Tordon).

Diverse, multi-storied forest stands should be recruited around wetlands and riparian areas. Wetland vegetation and riparian vegetation generally will be entirely undisturbed by logging, except as may be prescribed and approved by FWP to improve wildlife habitat. Conifer encroachment into sedge and woody shrub types near wetlands and streamsides may be prescribed if the effect would be to expand this zone of riparian vegetation. Large snags and downfall should be preserved and recruited around wetland edges and riparian areas. Human disturbance of any type would be minimized around Little Doney Lake from May 1 through August 30 to encourage successful nesting by Common Loon.

It is FWP's understanding that the landowner has no immediate plans to harvest timber, nor are there immediate forest management needs. However, the easement terms and this approval process leave options open for the landowner to actively manage forest stands if conditions change. The easement requires that forest management practices comply with Best Management Practices. The most recent edition of these practices would be copied and included as part of this management plan for reference.

PUBLIC HUNTING ACCESS MANAGEMENT

The Little Doney Lake Conservation Easement guarantees year-round non-motorized public recreational access to the parcel unless FWP determines such access must be restricted to facilitate necessary land or wildlife management.

For the 2008 hunting season, hunting access will be managed according to regulations adopted for the Ovando Mountain Block Management Area. FWP would accept responsibility for maintaining the parking area along Upper Dry Gulch Road.

PUBLIC SNOWMOBILE ACCESS

The Little Doney Lake property is currently an important link in the public snowmobile trail connecting Seeley Lake and Lincoln in winter, and it is agreed by FWP, the BCCA, and the larger Blackfoot Watershed communities that this will continue on the Little Doney Lake property until an alternative route is established. In the future, FWP and the landowner may agree to restrict snowmobile use of the property (including allowable dates and extent of use) as deemed necessary to protect important winter wildlife habitat values.

GRAZING PLAN

Livestock are not currently grazed on the Little Doney Conservation Easement. However, the easement specifically allows for livestock grazing to occur in the future should the landowner so desire. In order to implement the grazing provisions of the easement, FWP and the landowner must agree on and follow a grazing plan. The plan would blend ranch objectives with the purposes and requirements of the easement. It is premature to guess at a future grazing plan without knowing the objectives and needs of the landowner. Therefore, a grazing plan would be developed at such time as the landowner indicates a specific interest in introducing livestock.